

## TEACHING THE ROSARY: SOME BACKGROUND NOTES FOR TEACHERS

In our post-modern consumerist society, the young can have a supermarket approach to religion and may view what the church has to offer as an option, a collection of spiritual resources that can be called upon when required. In *Reasons for Living* (2006) Crawford and Rossiter characterise youth spirituality as individualistic, eclectic and personal. They write that religious traditions provide the young with helpful identity resources and the provision of access to these resources is fundamental to religious education. Faced with the overwhelming task of constructing their own meaning making system, young people are still open to being invited into the rich heritage and wisdom that religious traditions offer. Immediate relevance and pragmatic function are the allures that capture the interest of the young and focus their attention on spirituality and religion. However young people also have idealistic traits with a desire for a better world. They sometimes have difficulty believing or integrating the competing demands of idealism and pragmatism, frustrated with what they perceive “as outmoded elements in the belief structure of an older generation, quaint and antiquarian, with little relevance for them or for today’s society” (Crawford & Rossiter 2006, p.210).

One of the tasks of the Religious education is to interpret religious ideas and practice in ways that connect with young people in their searching, and to strengthen and develop the links with their cultural religious traditions. This paper provides some background notes for teachers and proposes the value of teaching the rosary in the RE curriculum. It is an ancient practice with a potential to open up ideas on prayer and spirituality. It has links to prayer forms in other religious traditions. As students explore the origins of the rosary, that exploration raises the importance of monasticism as an influence on the religious practice of ordinary people. It touches on the notion of legend and the place of legend in a religious worldview. It provides insight into one of the ways pre-literate people within a faith community have learnt about and in turn transmitted their religious heritage.

A short article titled “Hail Mary, it’s good for you” appeared in the Sydney Sun-Herald. It reported the results of an Italian study from the University of Padua which found that “repeating the rosary prayer slows breathing, improving the workings of the heart and lungs. The research team found that it was as effective as yoga in controlling breathing, enhancing concentration and inducing calm. Reciting the prayer

slowed breathing to about six breaths per minute, a rate believed to be favourable to heart function” (Sun-Herald 2002, Jan 6). The health benefits of reciting the rosary seem linked to the calming power of prayer. I had made brief reference to this article during a class on prayer. The following week, as I usually do, I began with the question, “Tell me something you learnt from class last week?” One student recounted how her grandmother was currently in hospital and had been repeatedly asking for her rosary beads. Rather than dismissing this request, the student said she had begun to realise how important these rosary beads were to her grandmother and told us how she had made the trip to retrieve them for her.

Graham English (2006) in his book on prayer “Saying Hello to God” points out that the repetition of praying a familiar prayer “stills the voice of the outside world in your head and helps to create a space for you to share with God” (English, 2006, p.26). The Catholic rosary is a prime example of repetitive prayer and is biblical in both theme and formulae (O’Carroll, 1982, p.313).

The term Rosary comes from the Latin *rosarium* meaning a rose-garden. Many ancient cultures associated their religious figures with flowers and by the Middle Ages for Christians the rose, a symbol of joy, love and springtime, was associated with Mary. One of the titles of Mary is “Mystical Rose”. The basic rhythm of the rosary is centred on the repetition of the Hail Mary.

### **The Hail Mary**

The Hail Mary developed as a Christian prayer over hundreds of years, from scriptural quotation to liturgical antiphon, then devotional prayer. The first half taken from the gospel texts, the words of the angel Gabriel to the virgin of Nazareth “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28) were joined with Elizabeth’s greeting “Blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb”. This combination can be traced back to the fourth or fifth century in the East, and the seventh century or earlier in the West (Ayo, 1994). The second part an intercessory ending of the Hail Mary developed in the late Middle Ages, an era of increasing liturgical devotion to Mary. It reflects the Catholic practice of intercessory prayer, which has always included prayer to the saints in heaven. “Holy Mary, Mother of God” expresses the Church’s belief that Mary is holy. Her title expresses the understanding of the incarnation, that Jesus was the Son of God from the moment of his

conception. The term “sinners” contains the Christian belief in our universal human situation ever needing God’s mercy. Mary is called on at the hour of death. In the Middle Ages with the plague all around, death was an ever present and fearful reality. In our death denying and media saturated society, we may ask how much has really changed, we still all die?

### How to pray the Rosary

English (2006) reminds us that many religions recommend the use of beads to assist in prayer and then outlines in detail how to pray the Rosary. I quote: Hold the beads in your hand. Start with one of the decades (the set of ten beads). Say the Lord’s Prayer. Then counting along the ten beads, say one Hail Mary, two Hail Marys, three Hail Marys, four, five Hail Marys, six Hail Marys, seven Hail Marys, more. When you get to ten Hail Marys say ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen’ Then say the Lord’s prayer again ‘ Our father who art in heaven...’Then one hail Mary, two Hail Marys as before. Whoosh! You’ve done another ten. Do this with each decade until you have used all five. All the time think about the life of Jesus. (The Mysteries of the Rosary provide a focus if you need one.) Soon you will find yourself meditating (English, 2006, p. 26).

The rosary in its present form, sometimes called the Dominican rosary, consists of the reciting of fifteen decades of Hail Marys, each introduced by the Lord’s Prayer and concluded with the Doxology, the Glory Be. Each decade, called a mystery, is a meditation on some aspect of the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary. Traditionally there have been three groups of five decades each, known as the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries, which focus on the Incarnation, Passion and Glorification of Christ. Usually five decades are prayed at a time and the prayers are counted on a string of rosary beads. In the Apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2002, Pope John Paul II authorised the addition of five more mysteries, the Mysteries of Light. These comprise five significant events of Christ’s public life: the Baptism in the Jordan; the wedding at Cana; proclamation of the kingdom of God; the Transfiguration; and the institution of the Eucharist. The addition of the Mysteries of Light with their Christ centred focus gave the devotion of the Rosary a more visible and explicit Christological perspective.

### Origins of the Rosary

A story from the writings of Alan de Roche in the fifteenth century has complicated the history of the rosary. The legend attributing the rosary to St. Dominic claims that in a vision around 1208 Mary appeared, gave him rosary beads, and urged him to preach it as a remedy against sin and heresy. O’Carroll (1982, p. 313) notes that there is little historical support for this account. The origins of the rosary rather reflect the desire to give ordinary people a form of prayer modelled on monastic prayer. The monks chanted the 150 psalms, divided into three groups of 50. It seems

that people who were unable to read the psalms would recite 150 Our Fathers. Monti (1995) writes

By the eleventh century, the custom of saying 150 Our Fathers as a substitute for the psalms was widespread among devout laity. This “poor person’s breviary” was often divided as was the Psalter, into three sets of fifty; the string of beads used to count them were called “paternosters” (Monti, 1995 p. 1138).

Around the twelfth century as devotion to Mary increased and the Hail Mary developed, it was used in this form of prayer. Brief phrases related to the life of Jesus and Mary assisted meditation as people prayed. While the rosary based on the Hail Mary started in Carthusian circles, it was the Dominicans who really popularised the devotion. The Dominican friars founded rosary groups known as ‘confraternities’ and often recommended the devotion in their preaching, as well they introduced changes that simplified the way the rosary was prayed.

The devotion in its present form of the meditation on its special fifteen mysteries accompanied by 150 Aves and fifteen Paters and Glories was first instituted by the Dominican Pope St Pius V, who attributed the naval victory over the Turks at Lepanto on Sunday, 7 October 1571, to the rosaries recited on that day by the Roman Confraternities (Graef, 1965 p.17).

### Teaching the Rosary

In presenting their example of an open, inquiring study of religion suitable for a secondary Religious Education classroom, Crawford and Rossiter (1985) outline four ways in which the devotion of the Rosary might possibly be taught. If anything, time has validated the usefulness of their analysis and present professional insights for religious educators as they reflect on their own attitudes and behaviour. Crawford and Rossiter (1985) admit the descriptions of the approaches are stylised and include the first three approaches, judged unsatisfactory, as a foil to an inquiry study of the rosary. The first approach means the teacher avoids the topic because he/she has no liking for the rosary. Even though the Rosary is listed in Diocesan Religious Education Curriculum, the topic is not taught because the teacher only teaches those aspects of Catholicism that he/she believes in personally and that does not include the rosary.

The second approach describes a teacher who has a strong devotion to the rosary and aims to encourage students to have a similar devotion. Crawford and Rossiter (1985) note that as the teacher laments the decline in Marian devotion, he/she views the past as a better era for devotion to Mary and appears to want the class to feel guilty for not keeping up the tradition of the rosary. While trying to be convincing about the personal value of this way of praying, the teacher urges the students to say the rosary more frequently. The pupils perceive that the teacher’s main aim is to improve the rosary-saying of the class. The third approach is characterised as an exhortation to pray the

rosary by a teacher who gives a false impression of their own commitment. While the teacher's approach is similar to what is described above, the difference is that the class perceives that the teacher probably has no personal devotion to Mary or the rosary at all, but puts up a front for the sake of the class "in the hope that it might make them more prayerful, better Catholics" (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985, p.80).

The final approach illustrates how the religious traditions of the Church can be made accessible to young people in a Catholic secondary school in a way that is educationally appropriate for a classroom context. It is characterised as an inquiring study of the rosary.

The aim of the unit on the rosary is to acquaint students with this Catholic devotion, and to help them assess how it has contributed to Catholic piety. The task for the students is explained as follows: An exploration of what the rosary is and what it has meant for Catholics in the past; what does it mean for Catholics today and what might be the future of the devotion? The teacher gives a historical outline of the devotion which addresses such questions as: What is the rosary? Who invented it? When was it first popularised? To what social and religious circumstances did Dominic and his followers address this devotion? How did the rosary fare as a devotion over the centuries? Working in groups the class has to do mini-research projects and present written reports on the following: What does the rosary mean to contemporary Catholics, particularly individuals for whom the devotion is very dear? This would involve pupils in interviewing their parents or some other adult Catholics. The students would temporarily suspend their own views and judgements to find out how some adults felt about the devotion. The survey could also give an indication of how popular the devotion is amongst Catholics. To add further perspective to the study, the teacher shows that rosary-like devotions have been practised in Hinduism and Buddhism for many centuries. After the completion of the projects, part of a class period is spent in the school chapel to give pupils an experience of saying the rosary together. They are told that there are different ways of praying the rosary; one did not always have to think intently about the particular words or set mysteries. In the concluding lesson, the students submit a simple assignment in which they try to assess some of the strengths and difficulties with the devotion, together with comment on what the devotion could mean to contemporary Catholics. Then a discussion of this assignment follows. The students comment on the main ideas that have emerged from their study; their ideas on why it has declined as a popular devotion and on what might happen to it in the future (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985, p. 80).

Educationally sound, approaches such as this also honour the spirit of Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom which speaks of seeking truth in religious matters as a process of free inquiry, "carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue" (Declaration on Religious Freedom, 1965, # 3). This same document notes the importance of creating an environment in which people can "be invited to the Christian faith, and embrace it of their own free will" (Declaration on Religious Freedom, 1965, # 10). While privileging the religious tradition of the sponsoring Church (in this case Catholic) the strength of Rossiter's approach is that while academically sound, it is essentially invitational rather than confessional. This paper has provided some background material on teaching the Rosary, providing both content and process to assist religious educators in their task of interpreting religious practice in ways that can connect young Catholics with their cultural religious heritage.

## References

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